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Paul Boesch and the History of Houston Wrestling (from Figure Four Weekly)

The story of the Houston Wrestling territory during the glory days of Texas Wrestling from the early-1950s through the mid-1980s is largely the story of its most famous and successful promoter, Paul Boesch.

There had been regular professional wrestling matches promoted in Houston at least back through the 1920s with promoter Julius Sigel, who handed off the business to his son, Morris. Morris Sigel had a reputation for honesty, something that his protege, Paul Boesch, would carry on through the decades. Boesch was born in 1912 in Brooklyn, N.Y., and over his career wrestled many of the top stars of the '30s and '40s, names such as Gorgeous George and Wild Bill Longson, though he never won any major world singles titles. He was a big man, well over six feet tall and close to 300 pounds, and his finisher was what was known as the time as the "sleep hold," the jiu-jitsu rear-naked choke that later became known as the sleeper. He began wrestling in 1932 after meeting legendary promoter Jack Pfefer while working as a lifeguard. He faced Benny Ginsburg in his debut, and he was quickly promoted to main event status by the legendary Jack Curley, working territories all over the world from the US to Australia to New Zealand. His in-ring career was cut short first by World War II, and then later by a serious automobile accident that put him out of wrestling for good. He was a war hero, who was awarded among things the purple heart and silver and bronze stars and clusters. His war exploits made him one of the more respected members of the Houston community, so much so that in 1971, while promoting wrestling full-time, he was awarded the Houston Sportsman of the Year award.

The car accident, which occurred in 1947 during a drive from San Antonio to Corpus Christi in between dates, was serious enough that Boesch was nearly killed. There were auto accidents galore during the territorial days since everyone drove city to city, often at excessive speeds and often late at night, perhaps more often than not while drinking, and there were no seatbelts or air bags. Boesch had been suffering from back pain since his mid-20s, and the auto accident was such that he was able to do a few more bookings, but the writing was on the wall for his in-ring career. Following the accident, Boesch moved into an announcer role for Sigel's Houston territory. He'd returned to Houston after the war because he wanted to return to wrestling, and the Texas territory was both very lucrative and also close-knit in the sense that all of the towns in the loop were fairly close together and an easy drive, at least compared to other territories. Boesch started out working as a wrestling radio announcer for KLEE Radio. Two years later, KLEE received a television license and the Houston Wrestling program moved to KHTV channel 39, where it ran on various nights and at various times for over fifty years. Interestingly, the story of KHTV has parallels to many wrestling television tales throughout history, including WCW. They started out on Friday nights and eventually moved to Saturday nights from 10 to 11:30. Later, the block was expanded another half-hour to make a two-hour block. At its peak, Houston Wrestling was doing better ratings in the time slot than Saturday Night Live. Eventually, a replay was added from 10 a.m. to noon on Sunday morning. At one point, a new GM was hired by KHTZ and he had an idea. Cut the Sunday replay, and all the people who watched on Sunday would be forced to watch on Saturday night, thus greatly increasing the ratings for that show. As it turned out, when they cut the Sunday replay they lost all of those Sunday viewers, and in fact they got no noticeable bump whatsoever for Saturday night, so all those Sunday viewers essentially just stopped watching wrestling when it was no longer available in the time slot they'd grown accustomed to. Eventually a new GM was hired, and this guy decided to put wrestling back on Sunday, and differentiating it slightly by adding action from Bill Watts' promotion, and that's when television really took off again in the '80s. The show during the heyday consisted of matches from whatever office Boesch/Birkholz were booking talent through at the time mixed with local Houston territory matches, interviews and wrap-arounds.

When Sigel passed away in 1966, Boesch figured that since he'd been helping run the territory for nearly 20 years and understood all aspects of the business, he'd approach Sigel's widow about buying the promotion. A deal was made, and Boesch took over the territory. Paul Boesch loved serious, hard-hitting professional wrestling, likely because he had been a big, hard-hitting grappler himself. (Case in point: One of his favorite feuds was Johnny Valentine vs. Wahoo McDaniel, probably the stiffest match-up you could book in wrestling during that era, as those two reveled in just beating the hell out of each other with hard chops, forearms, etc.) The Texas territory was such that for decades, all the promoters traded talent, and Boesch would bring in the biggest stars not only from Texas, but from all over North America, legendary names like Ric Flair, Bob Backlund, Dos Caras Jr., Mil Mascaras, Johnny Valentine and more. He didn't care what kind of style they worked or what they looked like, as long as they could go in the ring and draw money they were welcome in the territory. And guys loved working for the promotion, because Boesch ended up having a reputation as an honest promoter and a great payoff guy. At the end of the day he was ranked by many as number two behind only Sam Muchnick in St. Louis. He was so respected, in fact, that one Texas-area wrestler from the mid-'80s heyday said that despite Texas (and World Class in particular) being non-stop crazy party scenes, many of the wrestlers out of respect for Boesch refused to show up for his events loaded. As an announcer he called the action straight, and his intimidating physical presence was such that he often towered over the wrestlers he interviewed, and his gimmick was that of a former wrestler-turned-announcer who was not to be messed with.

As popular as the territory was throughout the '60s and '70s, the actual business heyday began in the early '80s, less than a decade before the collapse, under Boesch's nephew, Peter Birkholz, who had been working alongside his uncle in much the same way that Boesch had worked alongside Morris Sigel prior to Sigel's passing. Birkholz played the Larry Matsysik role to Boesch's Muchnick, and in 1982 he took over as head promoter, which allowed Boesch to move into a figurehead role with the company. At the time, Boesch's wife, who was absolutely loved by the wrestlers, had been fighting cancer and it was taking a major toll on him. He disappeared at one point to take care of her, and when he returned, on the way home from being picked up at the airport on May 14, 1982, he asked Birkholz how tonight's house was looking. Birkholz, who had booked the show and put everything together on his own, noted that it was going to completely sell out. He said Boesch looked at him and told him it was time, meaning his run as a promoter was over and it was time for Birkholz to run the show. At its peak in 1984 and 1985, with cards featuring match-ups such as Ric Flair vs. Terry Taylor for the NWA Title, Flair vs. Kerry Von Erich for the title, Flair vs. Wahoo McDaniel for the title, Rock & Roll Express vs. Midnight Express, and Nick Bockwinkel vs. Mil Mascaras for the AWA Title, Houston sold out more than 50 shows. Interestingly, despite booking so many title matches, in his entire career as a promoter Boesch only promoted one World Title change in his territory, Jack Briscoe over Harley Race on July 20, 1973.

Birkholz, being quite a bit younger, saw the lay of the land and had different ideas about how to promote a territory that had been successful for decades. He argued that the best course of action would be to raise the ticket prices and run fewer shows. Boesch was against the idea, but became convinced that he was getting old and the business was changing and it was time to try something new. What also helped was that Birkholz' ideas were helping to reenergize the territory and business was picking up. As had been the case in the past, Birkholz continued to work with all the promotions in and around the area, including Mid-South and World Class Championship Wrestling, the latter of whom had sent talent from 1977 through booker Gary Hart (who he came out of retirement to face in a match that year, drawing a huge crowd). The relationship with WCCW led to rumors among the wrestlers in the '80s that Gino Hernandez was the illegitimate son of Boesch, perhaps the offspring of Boesch and his long-time secretary. Hernandez, one of the biggest stars from the glory days of Texas Wrestling, died under mysterious circumstances in 1986

and Boesch was devastated. According to one former World Class wrestler, at the time all the wrestlers accepted this rumor as fact, though as the years went on and with the benefit of hindsight, this wrestler noted that while they did believe it at the time, today they don't think that was the case. Birkholz said it wasn't true, although Boesch and Gino were very close, largely due to the fact that Boesch had been very close to Gino's stepfather Louis Hernandez, who had been an area wrestler in the '60s. He felt that Boesch considered Gino like a nephew to him, since he'd known him his whole life, and since Boesch didn't have a son (I believe he had a stepson from another marriage who may have been born blind), Gino ended up being his "wrestling son." The World Class relationship had its highs and lows as the talent helped boost the Houston territory, but at the same time Boesch and Birkholz weren't high on certain demands that Fritz Von Erich had, including his desire to see his sons pushed only as top stars and main eventers.

When asked which booking office was most difficult to work with (Fritz's Southwest Sports, Southwest Championship Wrestling or Mid-South), Birkholz said, "Overall, all three booking offices were pretty easy to work with. Back in the days of the territorial promotions, everyone tried to work together to make more money. We had our moments with each booking office. However, that was just the nature of the business back then. Looking back, I do not feel that we had a hard time with any of them. Business was business and everyone ultimately worked together to make money." He noted that there were circumstances that caused them to move on at points from each of the different offices. "We did have to move from the Dallas office but that was due more to what was happening across the country. We did have to move from Southwest Championship Wrestling but that had more to do with the fact that Bill Watts became a partner. And we had to move from Mid-South Wrestling because of the move to the WWF."

The beginning of the end of Texas Wrestling actually began when cable television began to spread throughout the country, because, as with every territorial promotion, at the end of the day someone was going to go national and it was going to change the entire game. That person, obviously, ended up being Vince McMahon. In the mid-'80s, Birkholz and Boesch ended up bringing in Bill Watts to help with booking, and it was both a blessing and a curse. Boesch and Birkholz both appreciated Watts' booking mind, but he was also getting a percentage of the promotion and there was always the concern that he was going to end up running opposition. Plus, he had a larger-than-life and in many ways abrasive personality (which was ironic in the sense that Boesch went with Watts after dealing with the frustration of working with Tully Blanchard and Southwest Sports, since Blanchard also had the reputation of being abrasive at the time). In 1984, the oil business collapsed and over the next three years the local economy followed. Watts' UWF, which as Mid-South Wrestling had attempted to go national on WTBS, was losing money at a rapid clip, and he ended up making a secret deal to sell his territory to Jim Crockett Promotions. By "secret deal," we're talking a deal that he told nobody about, including his own son Joel Watts. The Houston territory was also suffering and Boesch had a decision to make -- to go with Crockett and Watts, or to align himself with Vince McMahon and take his chances with the WWF. Because of Watts' personality and the way the deal went down with the UWF, Boesch chose to go with WWF. Going into business with McMahon was in many ways difficult for him, in part because it had been his life's work and also because he always felt that he did what he did not only for himself, but largely for his fanbase, and they were devastated as well. At the end, when fans wrote to him upset about the changes, he personally wrote handwritten apology letters back to all of them, attempting to explain what had happened and saying he was sorry.

The relationship with McMahon lasted less than five months. The deal, brokered by Jim Barnett, was never going to work, and it became clear pretty much immediately. The Houston territory had been built on a certain style of hard-hitting serious pro-wrestling, and WWF in the mid-'80s was anything but. The fans were fiercely loyal to Boesch, and the product that began airing on KHTV was not the wrestling they'd grown up on and it was too different to get accustomed to. There was also the issue that with WWF promoting shows, often times due to the sheer volume of shows run around the country, injuries, and the usual pro-wrestling shenanigans, there were more no-shows than there had ever been previously (Boesch himself noted one WWE-promoted show that

had seven no-shows, more than he'd had in an entire year of booking). Birkholz recalled that when the deal went down they were told that if the numbers weren't there, everyone would have another meeting and decide which way to steer the ship. But at the end of the day, when the numbers weren't there they didn't have that meeting, and Birkholz saw the writing on the wall. He brokered a deal with McMahon to let Boesch go out with his head held high, a retirement show on August 28, 1987, where McMahon would pay for everything, but Birkholz could book anyone he wanted up and down the card (it should be noted that while Birkholz booked the matches, WWE put together the finishes and match order, which is why on a Paul Boesch Houston Wrestling Retirement show the main event featured Demolition in a tag match and not the Ted DiBiase vs. Jim Duggan match). It ended up one of the most unique WWF shows of the era, a card filled with old Boesch favorites, some of whom were decidedly not Vince McMahon favorites at the time. To show the support that Boesch had among the local fans, the show itself drew an advanced turn-away sellout of 12,000 fans to the Sam Houston Coliseum in one of the worst rainstorms that anyone who lived in the area could ever recall. It was a wonderful night, and a beautiful public end to the chapter of history that was Houston Wrestling.

The full card for that show saw Sam Houston (yes, in the Sam Houston Coliseum) over Steve Lombardi; Bruno Sammartino beat Hercules Hernandez via DQ (Sammartino did the show as a favor to Boesch); Brutus Beefcake beat Jimmy Valiant and then cut off some of his hair; Tom Prichard beat Mark Lewin; Hulk Hogan beat One Man Gang to retain the WWF Title (Gang had been UWF Champion three months earlier); Sherri Martel beat Fabulous Moolah to retain the Women's Title; Junkyard Dog & Tony Atlas beat Sika & Kamala; Terry Funk beat Chavo Guerrero Sr.; Ted DiBiase beat Jim Duggan in a classic Houston area match-up that actually resulted in Duggan getting his WWF job back after he'd been fired for being busted for drugs in a police stop with Iron Sheik; and Mil Mascaras & Tito Santana beat Demolition via disqualification.

Future President George H.W. Bush, at the time Vice-President of the US, sent the following telegram to Boesch during the show. The two were long-time friends, and Bush would often call Boesch when he was in town to see if there were any wrestling cards he could attend.

"To All Houston Wrestling Fans,

I'm sorry to miss the gala event in honor of my friend Paul Boesch. Paul has made a fantastic contribution to American sports. Through his leadership and foresight, wrestling is now enjoyed by millions of Americans. I treasure my friendship with Paul Boesch. We have known each other for many years. He is a great guy and wrestling will never be quite the same without his firm, principled leadership.

Sincerely,

George Bush"

Birkholz told us that despite rumors that Vince McMahon "broke every promise" that had been made when they first made their deal, likely stemming from a book Boesch wrote about his career (he wrote four total, two wrestling and two non-wrestling), at the end of the day he felt that the WWF did try, but that the business had changed and no amount of trying was going to make the deal work. He said there might have been aspects that could have been handled better, including a phone conversation between McMahon and Boesch regarding cutting ties that left Boesch devastated, but he was happy and appreciative that Vince allowed him to put together the retirement show and essentially have carte blanche with all the talent and booking.

Boesch was never one to sugarcoat things, and he never believed that outside forces affected his business. If the house was down, it was his fault, not the fault of the sun being out, rain falling, or whatever the traditional promoter excuse might be. He never even bought the story that the Texas Wrestling business was ravaged by the oil industry collapse and economic downturn of the mid-'80s, as pretty much everyone else theorized. He always noted that in the 1930s there was a wrestler named Whisker Savage who competed throughout Texas

and Houston, and that Whisker thrived during the Great Depression. It was the worst economic downturn of the entire century, and despite nobody having any money, they'd save up whatever they could in order to go to the arenas and see good ol' boy Whisker try to earn an honest living fighting the bad guys.

Paul Boesch died in 1989 of a heart attack. He had been in ill health for years, which was one of the reasons he agreed to turn over the book to Birkholz and take a figurehead role. Birkholz (and Boesch, for a period, proving that nobody ever really retires) ended up going to Crockett after the retirement show, helping promote through 1988. But the magic was gone, and at that point Birkholz stepped away completely from the business, as in, he got a job outside wrestling, never went back, and never even watched it on TV again despite the fact that it had been the biggest part of his life for several decades. WWF syndicated programming took over for the old Houston Wrestling show on KHTV channel 39, but eventually that dropped off as well and the station moved into non-wrestling programming. In the mid-1990s, the famous Sam Houston Coliseum was torn down. Houston became just another pro-wrestling city from that point forward, although in 2001 it became hot for pro-wrestling again as WWE brought WrestleMania to the Astrodome. Mania X7, headlined by the Rock vs. Steve Austin, is widely regarded as the greatest WrestleMania card of all time.

One former World Class wrestler told us this week: "I loved Paul. Greatest promoter that I ever worked for. His wife was awesome. She made me hand knitted socks for Christmas. I doubt Linda McMahon or any promoter's wife would take the time to make talent hand knitted gifts. Morale was always high when we worked for Paul, since we weren't screamed at in comparison to Watts. This atmosphere didn't make the talent slack off, since we worked hard, since we considered Paul to be a uncle-type relationship and we didn't want to disappoint him."